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Foucault on the Coronavirus, Biopolitics, and the "Apparatus of Security"

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Foucault on the Coronavirus, Biopolitics, and the "Apparatus of Security"

(Interviewer) Hi Michel! What are you doing with a face mask!? I thought the Corona Virus was affecting only humans, not puppets...

(MF puppet) It's just a matter of solidarity with you guys – and also perhaps a tribute to my former fate, as a human figure.

(Interviewer) You mean because Michel Foucault, as a human being, died from the consequences of an epidemic?

(MF puppet) Precisely. But let's talk about something different...

(Interviewer) How about biopolitics? Would be the most obvious thing to do...

(MF puppet) Well, obvious doesn't mean easy.

(Interviewer) What do you mean?

(MF puppet) I guess you allude to the things I wrote about quarantine practices and the disciplinary mechanism, for example: "a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts [...] Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. "

(Interviewer) Exactly. In „Discipline and Punish,“ you describe quarantine methods that were used in the 17th century against the plague as an early version of the panopticon...

(MF puppet) This was a quite specific manifestation of biopolitics. Don't forget that I was also interested in its earlier and later forms...

(Interviewer) Could you spell this out a little?

(MF puppet) For example the "great confinement" that emerged around 1600, when leprosy had disappeared from Western Europe. The massive structures or, to be more precise: the architectures that had been erected to fight this infectious disease – so called leprosaria – remained in place. In the following decades and centuries, these buildings were used to isolate and confine everything that modern societies would consider as unreasonable: "The role of the leper was to be played by the poor and by the vagrant, by prisoners and by the 'alienated' [...]" (History of Madness, p.6).

(Interviewer) Today, this would not just apply to prisons and asylums, but also to retirement homes...

(MF puppet) See? Already here, things are getting complicated. And then there are the actually modern forms of biopolitics that I describe as „apparatuses of security“ (Security, Territory, Population, p.55).

(Interviewer) In your lectures at the Collège de France...

(MF puppet) Voilà. The apparatus of security differs from the disciplinary mechanism in rather striking ways. It does not operate on the basis of partitions in space, but is grounded in „the rationalization of chance and probabilities“, in other words in statistics (Security, Territory, Population, p.59). Key concepts of this apparatus are “case, risk, danger, and crisis” (p.61), so it is not targeting specific groups within a society, for example patients or prisoners. Rather, it aims at an entire population. The principal goal is to identify “the coefficient of probable morbidity, or probable mortality, in this population” (p.62)

(Interviewer) Doesn't sound very spectacular. Seems like measuring and observing something like life expectancy.

(MF puppet) True. But it does go further and therein lies its specific modernity. Against the background of epidemics such as smallpox outbreaks, the apparatus of security also tries to “reduce the most unfavorable, deviant normalities in relation to the normal, general curve, to bring them in line with this normal, general curve.” (Security, Territory, Population, p.62).

(Interviewer) Sounds familiar. Today everyone is talking about "flattening the curve."

(MF puppet) But I guess this refers to something different, something like a hybrid of disciplinary and security mechanisms...

(Interviewer) This is really getting complicated.

(MF puppet) I told you all of this is not easy – except for us puppets. So I hope you stay healthy and sane in these crazy times...

(Interviewer) Thank you!

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